

MINITEX

SMSCM

ILLRQ 0931

1/11/85

ERIC MARKUSEN, FAC.

13  
JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY. VOL XII, 1978, PGS. 79-92  
BIALER, U.: "HUMANIZATION OF AIR WARFARE IN BRITISH FOREIGN  
POLICY ON THE EVE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR."

✓  
VER: PER, MPL, HAM, MAC, DUL, MORE  
L3

COPY / CCL

END ILLRQ 0931

✓  
MORE

**Table 2. Unemployment by Divisions — All Insured Persons 16.64**

Division	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	Mean of 8 years
London	4.7	7.6	11.6	13.1	11.0	8.5	7.8	6.5	8.8
South-Eastern	3.8	6.6	10.2	13.1	9.5	7.0	6.4	5.6	7.8
South-Western	6.8	9.2	13.1	16.4	14.1	11.6	9.6	7.8	11.1
Midlands	9.5	16.1	21.8	21.6	17.6	14.0	11.8	9.4	15.2
North-Eastern	12.6	21.6	29.9	30.6	25.7	22.3	21.5	16.6	22.7
North-Western	12.7	25.4	28.9	26.3	23.4	20.6	19.3	16.2	21.6
Scotland	11.2	18.4	27.4	29.0	25.8	23.1	21.2	18.0	21.8
Wales	18.8	26.5	32.0	38.1	34.5	32.2	30.0	28.5	30.1
Total	10.3	15.8	21.1	21.9	19.8	16.6	15.3	13.5	16.8

From: W. Beveridge 'A Study of Unemployment' *Economica* 1936.

J.D. Tomlinson

Lecturer in Economics at Brunel University, has just completed a Ph.D. dissertation on Anglo-Indian Economic Relations, 1913-28.

NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL MAY BE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT LAW (TITLE 17 U. S. CODE)

Jiri Dialer

## 'Humanization' of Air Warfare in British Foreign Policy on the Eve of the Second World War

The fact that Great Britain had everything to gain from a drastic restriction of air warfare, if this could be effected, was accepted as axiomatic throughout the 1930s. A constant contention at that time was that if, to take an extreme example, it were possible to secure the complete abolition of the use of aircraft for warlike purposes, the British Empire would return to the position it had held for several centuries before the coming of air power, when the heart of the Empire was virtually safe from assault, and the communications which bound it together could be secured by unchallenged sea power.<sup>1</sup> As had been shown elsewhere, the desire to tackle the danger inherent in the development of air power had an important effect on the making of British foreign policy during the period. Before October 1936, the British Government had tried to promote two forms of international agreement designed to minimize the danger of air attack.<sup>2</sup> From the time of the Geneva Disarmament Conference, it had been the aim of British diplomacy to secure an international air limitation agreement and an international guarantee against bombardment from the air. At the end of 1936 these pacts proved to be unattainable.

The only other form of international agreement which could have provided a certain degree of security from aerial bombardment, and which was considered possible by the British Government during the two years preceding the second world war, was an international convention setting out the rules of air warfare.<sup>3</sup> However, the Cabinet was divided as to the advisability of devoting effort to securing such a convention. The general opinion among British policy-makers throughout the 1930s was that the merits of both an international air limitation agreement and an international guarantee against aerial bombardment were such as to justify any efforts to promote them. However, some members of

*Journal of Contemporary History* (SAGE, London and Beverly Hills), Vol 13 (1978), 79-96



the Government were not fully convinced of those merits and saw many obstacles to the achievement of an international convention on rules of air warfare. While it was clear to the policy-makers that a code of international law governing and restricting the use of instruments of war could have some value as a restraining and delaying influence in the early stages of a war, they realized that, in the long run, the decision as to whether that law was to be observed or not would be one of expediency and would depend upon whether or not a breach of it was likely to promote the ends of one belligerent or another. This advantage could not possibly match the alleged long-range and tangible effect of any substantial air limitation agreement, and of an international guarantee against aerial bombardment.

In addition, there were substantial difficulties both about formulating a convention and about initiating negotiations on the matter. As to the former, there were two fundamental problems. The first was how to define the military objectives which would not be immune from aerial bombardment. It was the failure to solve this thorny problem that had always stood in the way of a convention, and until it could be solved, Britain could not put forward any promising basis for discussion, especially with Germany. The second problem was a political one: the advisability of launching such a plan in the face of an apparent reluctance on the German side on some critical occasions to negotiate on the issue of air disarmament.

All these considerations greatly affected the interminable debates in the Government on whether to take the initiative on opening negotiations. The result was that the Cabinet found itself early in 1939 in exactly the same position as in November 1936, namely, convinced that a convention would be advantageous, but without much hope of its materializing.

In the discussions on defence and strategy throughout the years 1935-39, the representatives of the War Office and the Admiralty showed a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the danger of bombardment from the air. In the discussions on rearmament they tended to underplay it, partly because of the battle for funds and resources, and partly because they were sceptical of the strategic ideas held by Lord Trenchard's followers at the Air Ministry. Thus, during 1934 and 1935, in the early stages of the discussions on British rearmament, they tried to convince the politicians that the

danger had been greatly exaggerated as a result of the widely shared but, in their opinion, unfounded speculations and hypotheses about the nature of the 'next war' and the ability of the air weapon to decide it. However, on some occasions they clearly showed a growing concern about Britain's liability and vulnerability to air attack by taking initiatives and lending their support to the promotion of an international agreement which would have minimized these dangers. In the late 1930s they proved to be the main supporters within the Government of the idea that Britain should do whatever she could to promote an international agreement to prohibit unrestricted bombardment from the air. Thus, on the three occasions on which this issue came to a head — in February 1935, June 1936 and July 1938 — it was Admiral Chatfield, the First Sea Lord, and successive Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff who were the strongest advocates of British initiative in this direction. The Admiralty's special interest and concern stemmed from growing apprehensions about the danger of air attacks on the British merchant fleet.<sup>4</sup> The War Office devoted a great deal of attention from 1935 onwards to the issue of air defence and, while unwilling to spend much of its budget on the Air Defence of Great Britain Plan, was greatly exercised about the fate of the civilian population in the event of unrestricted bombardment from the air.<sup>5</sup>

Late in February 1935, the Admiralty and the War Office sponsored a proposal to the Committee of Imperial Defence, to connect the projected Air Pact to a convention prohibiting unrestricted bombardment from the air in times of war.<sup>6</sup> The proposal was rejected by the CID, mainly because the Government considered the projected Air Pact and air limitation agreements to be the more promising means of tackling the danger. By the middle of 1936, the prospect of these agreements materializing seemed negligible. Not surprisingly, the Admiralty found it advisable to raise the issue of an international convention again. At the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 13 July, the First Sea Lord proposed that the CID should recommend to the Cabinet that the plans of the Services be based on adherence to the principles of The Hague Rules of Air Warfare at the Outbreak of War.<sup>7</sup> In other words, he recommended that any British bombardment from the air must not, as The Hague Rules generally specified, be directed against a civilian population in spite of the fundamental difficulties inherent in the interpretation of those rules.<sup>8</sup> In itself, such a proposition did not appear controversial. The 1923 Draft Hague Rules of Aerial War-



fare had never reached the stage of an international convention, though they were signed at the time by the British Empire representative; and, for obvious reasons, the British Government continued, throughout the twenties and thirties to declare its support for these draft rules whenever air disarmament was discussed. The special situation of London made it obviously in Britain's interest not to resort to the bombing of civilian targets in the early stages of a war in which she might be involved.

However, the other proposal made by Chatfield recommended something more than just the confirmation of a policy which had been adhered to for a long time, even though without clear specification from the CID. The First Sea Lord staff, with the strong support of the CIGS, further suggested that Britain should make a *public declaration* that she accepted Article 24 of the 1923 Rules as the policy which HMG would adopt at the outbreak of war without prejudice to action which might be taken if other nations were to resort to a clear violation of the civilian population.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of such a declaration was explained by Chatfield as opening the way to similar unilateral declarations on the part of the Powers and thus creating a restraining effect on an enemy who might be considering the possibility of resorting to unrestricted air bombardment in the early stages of a war. Behind the proposal was the hope that such a declaration by Britain, and probably by other nations, would exercise some restraint on Germany should she have to decide whether to 'take the gloves off' and launch an air attack on large British cities. It was considered that Germany herself would gain from such a move. As Chatfield put it, 'It was possible that Germany was not very happy about her industrial districts and the removal of this fear by declaration of our intention might have some advantage.'<sup>10</sup> Such a declaration, according to this proposition, would be useful as a means of soothing the 'air anxiety' of the British public: 'To declare one's adherence might assist in stopping the general belief and fears that the first thing to happen in war would be the bombing of London.'<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the Air Ministry's natural objection to any restriction on the use of air power in times of war, the Chiefs of Staff Committee accepted the suggestion and, recommending it to the CID, indicated that 'there might be something to gain and there should be nothing to lose from the declaration of a policy to which this country binds itself and conceivably it may prove a starting point for the consideration of more practical rules in the future.'<sup>12</sup>

The CID, at its meeting a week later, did not seem to be impressed with the advisability of such a declaration. The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, objected to the proposal mainly on the grounds that it seemed to interfere with the Foreign Office's specific programme for reaching a general settlement with Germany. He objected to a unilateral declaration until steps had been taken to ascertain what would be the attitude of Germany towards the proposed 'general settlement' during the forthcoming negotiations.<sup>13</sup> Thus the CID, while accepting that the Services' plan should be based on the principle that Britain would not resort to bombardment of a civilian population at the outset of war, rejected, at that time, the proposal for tackling the 'air peril' suggested by the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

The whole episode is of particular interest in showing that, sceptical as they may have been of the value of any international agreement outlawing the use of any particular kind of weapon,<sup>14</sup> and possessing intelligence reports from Germany that might have strengthened their scepticism,<sup>15</sup> the representatives of the two Services considered it worthwhile devoting a great deal of effort to promoting such an agreement, even if it could provide only a very short-lived immunity from aerial bombardment to Britain's big cities and merchant fleet. The tacit assumption behind their proposal was that, vulnerable as the big cities were at this period — when it was regarded as inevitable that 'the bomber will always get through' — it would be to the interest of all European Powers not to take the gloves off in the early stages of a war and that this, in turn, might delay the time when the civilian population would be violated. The tactics which the Chiefs of Staff Committee suggested as a means of promoting such a convention had in themselves been dubious and were therefore rejected by the CID. But the Chiefs of Staff Committee continued to regard an international agreement providing for air warfare rules as an important complement to other defence plans as a means of countering the 'air peril'.<sup>16</sup>

Although the CID declined, in July 1936, to accept the Chiefs of Staff proposal for a unilateral declaration, it reached a decision four months later which shows clearly that the promotion of an international convention establishing restrictions on air warfare was an important objective of British foreign policy.

At its meeting on 19 November 1936, Sir Samuel Hoare, at that time First Lord of the Admiralty, who had often expressed ap-



prehension about the danger of air attack, raised the question of the desirability of initiating such a convention. The problems stemming from Britain's great vulnerability to air attack, and especially the dangers of aerial bombardment on its maritime supply routes and on London were, by 1936, under discussion by many sub-committees of the CID<sup>17</sup> and Hoare urged the Committee to come to a decision on the code of air warfare. He quoted the conclusions reached by the sub-committee on fuel supply in times of war, that 'it would be to our general advantage to have an international agreement restricting aerial warfare, notwithstanding the doubt that must exist as to whether such laws would in practice be observed.'<sup>18</sup> The CID discussed the matter and, while accepting the Foreign Office's opinion that any step towards opening negotiations on such an agreement should await progress in the proposed Five Powers Conference,<sup>19</sup> approved the fuel supply sub-committee's conclusion. Lord Swinton, the Secretary of State for Air, gave his backing, stressing that an agreement would be of value even if it only held good for a short time after the outbreak of war. The CID accordingly invited him to formulate proposals to serve as the basis of an agreement. Only after the technical plans had been worked out would the Foreign Secretary consider the desirability of reopening the question with other Powers.<sup>20</sup>

As has been said above, the first task in the process of initiating a plan for a convention was the difficult one of defining Britain's requirements. It took the Air Staff, which appears not to have shared Swintons's ideas as to the desirability of a convention,<sup>21</sup> more than a year to formulate them. However, the chief reason for the delay in implementing the CID's decision proved to be a political one. Clearly, in early 1937, the British Government had come to consider that, mainly because of the Spanish Civil War, which was engaging the attention of the European Powers, the time was inopportune for initiating international negotiations on the subject of an air convention. Later in that year, however, their view changed.<sup>22</sup> By that time, events in Spain had highlighted the dangers of unrestricted aerial bombardment.<sup>23</sup> Air attacks on civilian populations, notably the one on Guernica, emphasized the need for a general international convention establishing rules of air warfare. The matter was under frequent discussion by the Non-Intervention Committee,<sup>24</sup> which in June 1937 adopted a resolution urging that 'both sides should abstain from the destruction of all open towns and villages and other objectives of non-military character,

whether by bombardment from the air . . . or by any other means.'<sup>25</sup> This seemed to provide a promising background for a British initiative, but what mainly contributed to the decision to take it were Hitler's hints to Lord Halifax in Berlin on 19 November that Germany was in favour of reopening negotiations on the subject. This led the British Government to hope, however cautiously, that Germany might accept a plan for a general settlement which would include, *inter alia*, provisions for the limitation of bombing aircraft, or at least for the restriction of aerial bombardment.

While the Foreign Office regarded the chances of Germany's agreement to open negotiation on the former to be almost negligible, they found a justification for their guarded optimism in Germany's attitude throughout the period 1935-37 to a convention for the humanization of air warfare.<sup>26</sup>

It seemed to the Foreign Office that the German attitude had not changed very greatly since early 1935. When Sir John Simon and Anthony Eden visited Berlin in March of that year, Hitler told the that 'the German Government particularly liked the idea of the prohibition of indiscriminate bombing of densely populated regions.'<sup>27</sup> The German attitude was further elaborated in Hitler's Reichstag speech of 21 May. 'Gradual progress' he said, 'is the best way to success. For example, there might be prohibition of the dropping of gas, incendiary and explosive bombs outside the real battle zone'. He went on to talk of the possibilities of concluding some new convention analogous to the Geneva Red Cross Convention, by which it ought to be possible to forbid and finally stop the bombing of defenceless civilian populations.<sup>28</sup> The German 'Peace Plan' of March 1936 suggested that any international conference that might be held in the near future should have very limited objectives if it was to have any chance of success. It gave as one of the immediate practical objectives of such conferences the prohibiting of bombing any kind of open localities outside the range of the medium artillery of the fighting fronts.

The British realized that the German attitude was based on military considerations; the Germans had to think of the vulnerability of their industrial centre in the Ruhr and realized that a convention would be to Germany's advantage in a war with Poland and Czechoslovakia if it prevented France from helping her allies by bombing this target, or delayed her doing so.<sup>29</sup>

As has been shown elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> the British at this period did not



consider a convention for the restriction of air warfare to be of prime importance, and concentrated on other forms of international agreement to minimize the danger of aerial bombardment. The Germans, on their side, did not mention anything about a convention in their diplomatic dealings with the British from the middle of 1936 to November 1937. Halifax's report on his visit to Berlin towards the end of the latter month provided the British with an opportunity to reopen the subject. After discussing this report on 24 November, the Cabinet decided to follow Hitler's suggestion as soon as possible, and the Air Ministry was urged to complete the formulation of British requirements, in any convention restricting aerial bombardment.<sup>31</sup> The Foreign Office noted at the time that Hitler's suggestion was not an isolated move and that throughout November and December, German officials gave the impression on various occasions that Germany favoured negotiations on the limitation of bombing.<sup>32</sup> However, hopes that Hitler might be contemplating an air disarmament agreement were dashed when, in his speech in the Reichstag on 20 February 1938, he made it clear that Germany would not change her well-known policy with regard to air limitation. Even the cautious optimism of the Foreign Office was now seen to be misplaced.<sup>33</sup>

Faced with this apparent change in the German attitude, the British Government had to decide whether to proceed with the preparation of a convention. This problem was far from trivial. On 1 March, the Air Ministry presented a memorandum on air disarmament to the Cabinet. Its main feature was a strong recommendation that any set of legal restrictions on air warfare must, to be of any value, be accompanied by limitations on materials and aircraft. Without such limitations, said the memorandum, any legal convention would be positively dangerous, because it might create a false sense of security.<sup>34</sup>

The problem facing the Government was clear. At the beginning of March, the most that could be hoped for as an immediately practical means for minimizing the air peril was some limited international agreement to 'humanize' air warfare; but, if the Air Ministry's suggestion were accepted, even this would not be achieved. The Foreign Office were not unanimous in their answer.<sup>35</sup> Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary, considered rules of air warfare restrictions on aircraft a delusion and a danger. Other officials maintained that it would still be advantageous to secure a convention that would humanize air warfare.<sup>36</sup> The discus-

sion became rather academic on 3 March, when the Ambassador to Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson, reported on a conversation with von Ribbentrop in which the newly appointed Foreign Minister claimed that Germany would not allow herself 'to be cheated by empty provisions (restrictions on air warfare) . . . even if the Soviet Union declared itself ready to refrain from the use of . . . bombs, it would be impossible to place any faith in such a declaration.'<sup>37</sup> It was clear from this remark that very little remained of Hitler's previously expressed willingness to proceed with an attempt to prohibit or restrict aerial bombardment.

However, by the middle of 1938 the need for a convention seemed considerably stronger as far as Britain was concerned. The growing tension surrounding the Czechoslovakian issue made it obvious that there was imminent danger of an armed conflict involving Britain. The Cabinet was well aware of British inferiority in air power and of the inadequacy of the air defence of Great Britain, and though the chances of achieving a convention were extremely slender, the Government found it advisable, late in 1938, to renew the discussion on the subject. The Air Ministry agreed to withdraw its demand that legal restrictions should be negotiated only alongside some restriction on aircraft.<sup>38</sup> Probably this was partly because there was nobody left in the Government who believed that Germany would by now agree to any kind of air limitation agreement, but the main reason was the initially unsuccessful results of the experiments of Bomber Command. These indicated that it was not capable of tackling the much feared 'bolt from the blue' by striking directly at the German air bases and thus playing an immediate and major part in the critical stages of defence.<sup>39</sup> A special CID sub-committee (the Sub-Committee on Limitation of Armaments) began discussions on the whole issue on 7 July.<sup>40</sup> This sub-committee, which consisted of representatives of the Services and the Foreign Office, was unanimous in its view that a legal convention would be in Britain's best interest, despite its equally unanimous view that the convention would not be observed for long after an outbreak of war. Like the CID in November 1936, the sub-committee considered the main advantage of a convention to be its presumed deterrent effect on an enemy. Moreover, the members seemed to share the opinion of the Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, that 'anything would be for the good which would make the knock-out blow more remote.'<sup>41</sup> The sub-committee accepted the suggestion of the Foreign Secretary that, in



an effort to break the impasse in negotiations with Germany, they should work towards a bilateral agreement which, when reached, might induce other Powers to follow suit. This, Halifax thought, would overcome the German disinclination to open negotiations on a convention, which seemed to stem from their suspicious attitude towards the Russians.<sup>42</sup> However, before negotiations could be opened, the British requirements had to be defined. For this purpose, a special committee, headed by Sir W. Malkin of the Foreign Office, was charged in particular with determining the degree of immunity which Britain should aim for, and the manner in which she should attempt to improve the Draft Hague Rules.<sup>43</sup>

The Committee suggested two principles or methods for restricting aerial bombardment: confining it within certain geographical limits, which might be defined as the area in which fighting on land or sea was actually taking place; and defining the objectives which alone might legitimately be bombarded from the air and the conditions in which the bombardment of such objectives was permissible. However, the committee was unable to say which was more likely to be accepted by the Powers concerned; nor was it able to reach a definite conclusion about which was likely to be more in the interest of Britain.<sup>44</sup> The report was put before the Limitation of Armaments sub-committee on 18 July, and in the discussions which followed, two important questions were raised.

The first was the degree of immunity which Britain should aim for, with particular reference to whether it would be to her advantage to include factories well-known to be engaged in the manufacture of arms, ammunition or distinctively military supplies as legitimate military objectives under The Hague Rules. It was pointed out that recent investigations into the vulnerability of the German air industry had proved that their industrial organization was much more vulnerable than British military authorities had previously supposed. In particular, the Ruhr, with its enormous concentration of war industry and materials, contained serious bottlenecks in the system of distribution of electric power and gas. It was therefore open to question whether it would not be to Britain's advantage to retain the right to bomb German industrial centres, even if this implied a recognition of Germany's right to bomb similar targets in large British cities. The committee agreed that this question should be remitted for examination and report to the Joint Planning Sub-Committee, with the assistance of the Board of Trade, the Industrial Intelligence Centre and the Air Target Sub-

#### Committee

The second question was of particular interest and centred on the price Britain might be asked to pay for Germany's cooperation in promoting such a convention. The Malkin Committee's report indicated that any rule proposed by Britain would probably 'be met with a demand that we should, in return, accept such a limitation of belligerent rights at sea as would protect the enemy's civilian population from the suffering resulting from stoppage of sea-borne supplies.' The question was, therefore, whether to agree to the abandonment of some traditional British maritime rights, in particular the interception of foodstuffs, which might be demanded by the Germans as a *quid pro quo*.<sup>45</sup>

The strongest supporter of the idea that Britain should agree to such a bargain if Germany demanded it was, surprisingly, Lord Charfield, the First Sea Lord. He emphasized that Britain should be ready to pay a high price for a guarantee that her civilian population would not be attacked, which would mean a return to the secure position she enjoyed in 1914. He suggested that the fact that naval blockade was recognized by Germany to be so powerful a weapon that she might make that demand would influence her to observe her own engagement not to bomb Britain. The Chairman of the Committee, Sir Thomas Inskip, the Minister for Coordination of Defence, who, in putting the pros and cons of the suggestion, seemed to concur with Chatfield's contention, stressing the widespread belief that the danger of losing a short war was inherent in aerial bombardment on Britain: 'Assuming that both sides honoured the agreement', he said, 'it would mean that whereas it might jeopardize our chances of winning a long war, it would make it impossible for us to lose a short war.' Sir Robert Vansittart and Duff Cooper objected to the idea of bargaining, but the sub-committee decided that the question should be examined further, and remitted it for report to the Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in Times of War.<sup>46</sup>

On 24 October, the Joint Planning Committee submitted its report, which recommended the abrogation of the right to exert pressure on Germany by aerial bombardment on her industrial centres in the Ruhr if the Germans would abrogate their right to bomb London and British supply systems.<sup>47</sup>

The committee also recommended the degree of immunity which Britain ought to try to obtain. It regarded as impractical the German proposal for limiting air attack to the 'battle zone' because of



the difficulty of defining this and of obtaining a general agreement on the lines of the Hague Rules, which would attempt to define military objectives and the circumstances in which they might be attacked. The committee emphasized that the fact that most of Britain's industry and a great part of her population must be regarded as 'armament industry' in modern war rendered it unlikely that a satisfactory degree of immunity would be obtained by this form of restriction. It therefore recommended that Britain should require that aerial bombardment outside the 'battle zone', be allowed only in order to permit air attacks against arm forces.<sup>48</sup>

Two weeks later, the Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in Times of War discussed the second question which had been raised by the Limitation of Armaments Committee, i.e., the restriction of British maritime belligerent rights in return for a German undertaking to avoid air attacks on the civilian population. The Advisory Committee objected strongly to such a bargain, whose practical effect, it held, would be to invite Britain to give up two methods of imposing her will on the enemy in return for one. The surrender of maritime belligerent rights, according to the Committee's report would neutralize the advantages of naval superiority as against army superiority, and would in practice confer benefits exclusively on all Britain's potential enemies. The Committee was of the opinion that the mere existence of the highly vulnerable Ruhr should render such a bargain unnecessary. Its final argument against the proposal was the disastrous results to Britain should Germany break the agreement. As was pointed out by the Committee:

It would always be comparatively easy for an enemy profiting by the restriction of British rights of interception to build up reserves of commodities during the earlier stages of war and then to throw over the agreed rules and attempt to secure a decision by unrestricted air attack. The essence of such a move would lie in its quick effect: whereas the sanction of increased economic pressure by naval and diplomatic action would operate very slowly.<sup>49</sup>

The unequivocal conclusion of the Committee did not preclude the Cabinet from taking steps to open negotiations with Germany, but it did prevent the use of a very important lever in these negotiations. However, when — early in January 1939 — the Limitation of Armaments Committee resumed its discussion on the two reports for which it had asked in the previous July, there seemed to be a

distinct change of approach to that issue. Sir Kingsley Wood, the Secretary of State for Air, developed some very powerful arguments against continuing the enquiry. He suggested that the international position had altered so much since the Committee was appointed, that if Britain were to come forward now with a plan for disarmament, it would appear to be from weakness. This would have a deplorable effect not only on the British people but on the world in general. The Committee seems to have concurred in Kingsley Wood's opinion and to have believed that, in the face of the overwhelming preoccupation with rearmament, it would be a waste of time to devote any effort to promoting a convention on aerial bombardment.<sup>50</sup>

The Committee did not hold any more meetings and, although the Prime Minister was of the opinion that the enquiry should be continued, no further progress was made. The matter became, as one official put it, 'a trifle embarrassing'<sup>51</sup> to the Government, since there were recurrent approaches by Parliament and by some foreign Governments to find out about the progress of the enquiry.<sup>52</sup> It appears that early in February 1939, the British Government finally gave up the last hope of realizing the CID's conclusion of November 1936.

**There seem to have been two main reasons** for the failure of the British Government to secure a convention on the restriction of air warfare. The first was the distinct lack of enthusiasm in the Government for hastening the process by which it could have been realized. This seems to have been inherent in the great complications involved in formulating or initiating the convention and the short-range and dubious advantages and, to a large extent, explains the long period of apparent inactivity on the British side. The second reason seems to have been the German attitude towards British initiatives, mainly in early 1938. However, long after the breakdown of discussions with Germany on air limitation and the proposed air pact in 1936, the British Government was still trying to secure the last form of international convention still considered achievable in order to minimize the danger of a 'bolt from the blue' by air attack. It is worth noting that while the discussions on a convention in 1932-33 were largely abstract, since there was no actual experience of air raids on civil population,<sup>53</sup> the discussions of 1937-38 were apparently greatly influenced by the horrifying —



though militarily inconclusive<sup>54</sup> — raids during the Spanish civil war. For the British Government, the bombardment of Guernica and Barcelona engendered a widespread and long-term anxiety. These towns experienced air raids on a much smaller scale than was anticipated in a war involving Germany and Britain, but their fate was regarded as a clear omen of what might happen to London in the case of an air attack by Germany with no holds barred.<sup>55</sup>

The discussions in the British Government about a convention for humanizing air warfare show how sensitive the makers of British policy were to the danger of aerial bombardment. The evidence is clear in at least two respects. First, the Cabinet continued to consider it feasible and advantageous to secure such a convention despite Germany's clear refusal to cooperate and despite the inherent difficulties that had so far blocked agreement on it. Secondly, the Cabinet entertained the possibility of bargaining away some of Britain's highly prized naval power in return for very dubious German cooperation over an air warfare convention.

To put this phenomenon in its right perspective one should note that from the early 1930s in Britain the fear of a knockout blow by air attack was a widespread preoccupation if not an obsession. The fear was based on estimates of the impact of air power on the 'next war'. These estimates, which proved to have been exaggerated by both professionals and amateurs, portrayed air attack in almost apocalyptic terms, as Harold Macmillan wrote in his memories: 'We thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear warfare today.'<sup>56</sup> Indeed the estimates of the joint planning sub-committee of the CID in 1936 gave the number of casualties that would result from one week of aerial bombardment as 150,000: a picture that even H.G. Wells could hardly have made more frightening. However, the lack of realism which surrounded much of the discussions on a convention of air warfare late in 1938, the hope of securing an agreement, and the considerable price which some ministers seem to have been ready to pay for one, showed an acute misunderstanding of Germany's intentions, a misunderstanding which so much dominated British appeasement policy at that time.

## NOTES

1. See Donald Eugene Smith, *A Comparative Study of the Influence of Air-power on the National Policies of Germany, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union*. (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, the Catholic University of America 1951), pp. 133-65.

2. See R. Chaput, *Disarmament in Britain Foreign Policy* (London 1935) 318-63.

3. On this subject see J.M. Spaight, 'Air Bombardment' in *Year Book of British International Law*, vol. 4, 1922/3, 21-33; *Air Power and the Cities* (London 1930); 'The Chaotic State of International Law Governing Bombardment', in *The Royal Air Force Quarterly*, 1938, 24-32; 'Legitimate Objective in Air Warfare', in *British Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 21, 1944, 158-64, and D. Johnson, *Right in Air Space*, (Manchester 1965), 39-43.

4. See letter from Mr Seal of the Admiralty to Mr Fitzmorice of the Foreign Office of 23 August 1937, in which he analysed the Admiralty's attitude on this issue, FO 371/20700, C 6004/14/62.

5. See Montgomery-Massingberd notes on this in Massingberd Papers, vol. 158. See also Liddell Hart Papers 11/1938/92. Early in 1936 the CIGS made the point that 'to challenge Germany to a type of war in which we must be in an inferior position would appear to be sheer folly. Air limitation is therefore of infinitely greater importance to our security than the production of superior air forces.' January 1936, Cab. 64/35.

6. See U. Bialer, *Some Aspects of the Fear of Bombardment from the Air and the Making of British Defence and Foreign Policy 1932-1939*. (Ph.D., London University 1974), 146-74.

7. It should be noted that the Admiralty raised the issue at the time of the Ethiopian crisis in connection with the military plans for war with Italy. It proposed that, since Britain would suffer more than Italy from air attack, it was advisable for her to declare her interpretation of the Hague Rules in connection with indiscriminate bombing in the hope that thereby she might be able to effect a restriction on bombing. However, no decision on the question had been reached. 181 COS Cab. 53/56. On the Admiralty's ambivalent assessment of the danger of air attack as far as the Royal Navy was concerned at this time, see Arthur Marder, 'The Royal Navy and the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935-1936' in *American Historical Review*, LXX, 5, 1970, especially 1344-45.

8. One of the important reasons for the failure to reach an international convention based on The Hague Rules of 1923 had been that they adopted the general principle that bombardment from the air was legitimate only when directed at military objectives. The crux of the problem was the difficulty in defining and reaching agreement on what constituted a military objective. Thus the Rules left it to the discretion of the attacker whether a military concentration was sufficiently important to justify a bombardment. See J.M. Spaight, *Air Power in the Next War* (London 1938).

9. 181, COS Cab. 53/6.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.